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ABSTRACT

There are a variety of ways in which the two-year or community college can be distinguished from other institutions of higher education. These differences affect the ways in which evaluation is implemented at the two-year college. One difference relates to the mission of the community college. The community college's open-door policy changes the focus of evaluation from student selection to student placement, while the college's orientation toward community needs underscores the importance of needs assessment, and its curricular comprehensiveness mandates that outcomes measures reflect the multiple goals of students. The two-year college environment also has some unique characteristics; e.g., community college students differ from four-year college students in terms of their characteristics, objectives, and attendance patterns; community college faculty are more often hired on a part-time basis; the college's emphasis is on teaching rather than research; and faculty and administrators comprise a less sophisticated audience for evaluation reports. These differences have several implications for evaluation: (1) nontraditional student attendance patterns call for new models of retention and attrition and different research methodologies; (2) faculty members are less willing to become involved in evaluation projects; and (3) there is a strong need for straightforward communication of research results. The Office of Institutional Research at Miami-Dade Community College, for example, has evolved considerably over the past few years in response to the unique mission and changing environment of the institution. (EJV)

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SCOPE AND FOCUS OF EVALUATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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SCOPE AND FOCUS OF EVALUATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

More people than ever are attending college. According to Andrew Hacker, undergraduate enrollments trebled between 1960 and 1983. Only half of that increase was due to the baby boom. The rest was due to the greater proportion of young people attending college. In addition, it has become a more common occurrence to find older students attending post-secondary institutions.

Many of these students enroll in the two-year college. In 1960, two-year programs accounted for 14% of enrollment. By 1982, this type of institution was handling 42% of the undergraduates. Most assuredly, the community college has become a force to be reckoned with in higher education.

There are a variety of ways in which the two-year or community college can be distinguished from other institutions of higher education. These differences impact the ways in which evaluation is implemented at the two-year college. One is the mission of the two-year or community college. The purpose of most two-year colleges is to give everyone a chance at post-secondary education, much like the land grant institutions of yesteryear. With such an open door policy, emphasis is placed on insuring useful placement rather than selection decisions. The decision arena is outside the realm of the admissions and registration office, moving rather into the testing and student services area. Some examples of evaluation activities might be assessing placement cut scores for optimal placement decisions,

studying the benefits of remediation compared to the drawback of slowing student progress through the system, and the efficacy of advisement system.

An additional mission of the two-year or community college is to meet the needs of the community, whatever they may be. Providing data for decision-making, therefore, will emphasize the needs assessment function of evaluation, multiple goals, and the multiple constituencies involved. Above all, since the community college system is supposed to be responsive, evaluations will also need to be responsive.

The mission of the community college is not simply to serve as a shortened version of the four-year experience which undergraduates complete; it has a tradition of vocational training as well as academic preparation for transfer. Therefore, an effective evaluation of community college functioning will use multiple outcomes which include the multiple goals of community college students. Many (and perhaps most) community college students do not plan to obtain a baccalaureate degree. In some cases they may be there only to upgrade their skills to the extent that they can function more effectively in the job they hold, or to obtain a better job. Degree-seeking behaviors, therefore, will also differ.

The <u>environment</u> of the two-year college, as well as its mission, has some unique characteristics. First, I have already hinted that the student body at two-year colleges is very different from that found in most four-year residential institutions. A majority do not carry a full-time course load. Further, community college students move in and out of the system, "stopping out" for as little as a term or as long as several years

on a frequent basis. The student group as a whole is older and contains more females, who often are returning to school after an extended period to learn some job skills. Many of the students arrive lacking basic skills or fluency in English. Because of the open door policy, they will not be turned away. Recall, too, that this is an environment of commuters, not residents. Some may hold full-time jobs and attend only in the evenings or on their lunch hours. In any case, at the end of the day, these students do not return to their dorms or their fraternity or sorority houses to engage in social activities.

There are several implications for evaluation based on these student characteristics. One is that this is evidently a very different student group, one that is at much higher risk for failure because of lack of entering basic skills, low levels of on-going involvement with the institution, and pulls of job and family. Comparing directly, therefore, the outcomes of a community college with that of a university without controlling for the level of basic skills as well as significant background variables will result in the comparison of apples and oranges. In addition, traditional models of retention and attrition, which were based on the behavior of students in residential four-year schools, or even studies such as Willingham's Success in College, cannot be directly applied to the community college because the students simply are not there for extended periods, both during the day and throughout their college careers. Simply attempting to survey and follow-up this group also presents special problems because of their mobility and on-again, off-again enrollment status. As a result, any cohort assessment should cover at least three years before checking graduation rates.

Faculty and administration differ, too. There is typically a greater percentage of part-time faculty in the community college, in part to meet the shifting needs of the community. In an evaluation, therefore, it is difficult to control or even gain easy access to many of the faculty because they teach their class, then leave. Nor are they readily persuaded by administrative pleas or captured for committee assignments.

In addition, the emphasis in a community college is clearly on teaching, with little support for any research activity by faculty. From an evaluator's standpoint, this is nice since the guidelines for evaluating faculty behavior become more clear-cut. However, getting faculty involved in evaluation at the classroom or program level is extremely difficult since there is little payoff for participation.

Both faculty and administration comprise a less sophisticated audience for evaluation reports than one might find, for example, in a large research-oriented university. As a result, there is a strong need for straightforward communication, especially on procedures and statistics. On the other hand, evaluators in the community college find that they need to deal less with the perennial graduate student syndrome, that cluster of behaviors where all data-gathering activity is criticized and rejected outright if any flaw is revealed.

Administrators are typically the target audience for evaluation reports in the community college. Compared to other types of institutions, it seems easier to get administrators' attention and get results implemented, perhaps because there are fewer levels of bureaucracy and less

tradition to attend to. It may also be due to the fact that fewer administrators than found in state universities, for example, have risen through the ranks from assistant professor to department chair through dean. Instead, more community college administrators have a degree in educational administration, and perhaps have been taught to attend to data as a part of making decisions.

The final component of the environment that I believe impacts evaluation at the two-year college is the public perception of this type of institution. To be perfectly frank, in most quarters the community college is perceived as "tinker toy tech," a place to receive an inferior education. While all of higher education has come under increasing fire for the declining quality of the undergraduate preparation, the community college is probably the place where criticism will be focused in the future. This has already happened in Florida. For one reason, the community college is perceived by many as an extension of the public school system and therefore next in line for public scrutiny. Some authors even refer to the education students receive in the community college as "grades 13 and 14." In addition, a large remediation function takes place at the community college, and students and faculty are viewed as not being able to make it in a "real" college. Others perceive the community college as a place to receive only vocational training and leisure or community activity classes. Given these perceptions, it is obvious that simply citing graduation numbers and rates will not suffice to appease an increasingly critical public. Higher education in general, and the community college in particular, is finding itself standing in the shoes of the public school sector, being asked to

provide test scores or at least outcomes which the public will find valuable and empirical.

These are the general characteristics of the community college as I see them and the ways that they tend to drive some evaluation functions in the community college. Now let me get a little bit more specific and talk about evaluation at my institution in my state, Florida. Miami-Dade Community College may not be a perfect example of the community college system. It is larger than most. It exists in the only state with strong articulation agreements for transfer to upper division and a legislature which is in love with mandated testing. Yet I believe it is an institution which has faced, and continues to face, many of the problems that plague other community colleges.

Miami-Dade Community College has four campuses with a combined enrollment of over 63,000 students a year. Over 14,000 of these students are in college for the first time. About half of the group plan to receive an Associate in Arts degree, an indication of plans to transfer. About 88% are considered part-time, generating less than 30 hours a year in credits because of "stopping out" one or more terms and/or taking a reduced credit load. In any given term, only about 35% of the students are carrying a full-time load. At Miami-Dade, over 50% of the student body is Hispanic, 56% are female, and 25% are over the age of 30. Two out of three of the first-time-in-college students require basic skills preparation in one or more areas upon entry to the college. Because there are so many part-time students, the modal time to complete a degree is three years, not two, leading one to question the misnomer, "two-year" college. In any given

graduation group, one will find several students who first enrolled in the college as long as 20 years ago.

The Office of Institutional Research at Miami-Dade has also grown fairly large, at least as evaluation units in community colleges go. We currently have a professional staff of five, with one or two more positions soon to be added. Two of the positions, however, are used to respond to state reporting requirements. This group is supported by 2½ staff associate positions who do much of the number crunching and organizing in the office, and 2½ secretarial positions. From the computer operations area, we have an assigned systems analyst and one programmer; a second programmer will also probably be added within the next year or two.

A perusal of research report titles issued across the past ten years shows some interesting changes reflecting state mandates, institutional changes, and a desire to move from a reactive to a proactive posture. In 1977, for example, most of the reports issued involved enrollment and graduation measures, along with a few "think" pieces by the Dean of Institutional Research. Others reflected what were current issues at the time (predicted ratio of student FTE to District Administration personnel, the number of Iranian students, comparison of male and female salary levels).

In the late 70s and early 80s, Miami-Dade instituted a series of reforms. What makes this movement of more than local interest is that other institutions are now considering similar changes in the wake of increased public pressure. What Miami-Dade did, among other things, was to reinstate placement testing and mandate remediation for those who were academically

unprepared, institute what was known as standards of academic progress so that students had to maintain a minimum GPA of 2.0 and remain enrolled in a majority of their classes, decide upon a core curriculum which all students must take, and remove college credit for remedial courses. For the uninitiated, these changes may sound like policies which every institution should already have in place. Many institutions do not, as evidenced by some of the current criticisms leveled by various national panels.

Shortly thereafter, the Florida legislature shook up the higher education system, mandating a sophomore-level competency-based exit test which each student needed to meet in order to receive an A.A. degree and to transfer to upper division. They mandated the number of words students must write and the number of math and English courses students must take. They recently finished with statewide entry-level mandatory placement testing.

The Office of Institutional Research also changed. Reading a report list from 1985 or 1986 is very different from reading the ones that appeared in 1977 and 1978. Now much of the energy was focused on testing and curriculum issues. Other themes which have begun to emerge are defining student success and measuring the impact of the college on the community.

Five to ten years from now I believe that the issues addressed at our college and at other community colleges will once again be changing. On the local level, we are gearing up for a second wave of reform. This time the emphasis will be on teaching and learning. In the next couple of years we will be trying to establish indicators of staff quality of teaching and student quality of learning beyond the simple assessment of basic skills.

This is a task which an increasing number of community colleges will be addressing. In part it will be in response to the increasing number of studies which decry the quality of undergraduate education. In part it will be in response to legislators and governors who are taking an increasingly close look at higher education. In part it will be a response to accreditation committees who demand outcome measures instead of the time-honored inputs such as number of library books and percent of faculty with Ph.D's. In the southern region, for example, outcome measures are already being mandated and committees are at work to develop them.

Most community colleges currently remain in the report-oriented posture, spending most of their time responding to state and federal reporting requirements. This is due both to the lack of personnel available to do more evaluation and, in some cases, a lack of valuing of this function. With these pressures, however, the quantity, and hopefully the quality, of evaluation in the community college system will improve. Yet, the only really effective evaluation that can take place will need to consider both the unique mission and environment of the two-year college. When it comes to outcomes for post-secondary education, the three musketeers motto of "one for all and all for one" simply will not do.

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